

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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South winds are meticulously drying out every inch of the Shortgrass Country. The summer heat has held back, yet areas that missed most of the spring rains are far too arid.

In spite of the drouth, February lambs are moving to market two weeks ahead of schedule. The percentage of fats is running higher than any time since ranchers started spring market. Scales fees are bound to be on the upswing as the crop is being harvested at weights above 80 pounds.

Two lamb buyers were at the ranch early last week. Judging by there bearish humor, they must have been associating with wool buyers. The one representing the packers said he thought by this time next month the only demand would be for what tallow the Eskimos bought to store their dog harness.

The other fellow, an order buyer, was a bit more optimistic. He felt that the annual Fourth of July barbecue for retired barbers of the State of Rhode Island would strengthen demand in the coming weeks. He said these barbers always buy five or six lambs for their annual cookout.

I didn't pay much attention to their story until late in the same day when a cowboy came in wanting to sell four baby skunks that he'd captured in the pasture. The neighbors, you see, had told him that pet shops over in San Angelo would pay all kinds of money for suckling polecats.

For the sake of peace, and to get to work, I called a lady polecat dealer. Oh yes, she was very interested in buying the skunklets, but as much as she hated to say it, the market had just dropped from \$4 to \$3 per head. The volume, according to her, was exceeding the demand.

I expected any minute for her to claim that the Dow Jones averages were playing havoc with skunk trading.

Now bear in mind that skunks are a different commodity from other four-legged stock. Holding them over for a better market isn't possible. Weight loss won't hurt you; but even in this open country, skunk musk can give you a crowded feeling. Quick turnover is a must in the polecat trade. With all this blabbering about air pollution, a man wouldn't want to get too many on hand at the same time.

So I told the lady we'd deliver them in an hour at a point 12 miles this side of San Angelo, on the upwind side. The old gal made the same happy sound that is common among the winners' circles all over the world.

June may go down as the month when both the lamb trade and the skunk industry were ruined. One thing about it, if the producers fail, the middleman can always find a job on the stage or in the story-telling-game.